

Chapter One:

Prolegomenon

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Far to the north of the world, it slept. In the cold and the dark; in a pit of frozen terrors. Five hundred feet beneath the permafrost of the Land of Baudheil lay the Black Gate of Xiviroth. A gate made from obsidian stone, and the bones of eldritch creatures, held back something beyond the nightmares of man. Flush with the ground it was imbedded in, the gate strained against the locks that held back a monstrosity.

As power of the most wicked and oldest magics seeped though the gate, one of the nine locks, that bound the iris of the circle, began to strain and crack under pressure. Rusted shards of a cast iron filled the air and blew forth. When the dust settled, eight locks remained. Surges of the darkest power returned back to the world at the diminishing of the gate that restrained them. Through the bindings of ruin, an aberration called forth in a shrill cry that forced black beasts to stir from their graves.

At the edge of the pit, where the Black Gate waited, a shadowy figure stood and watched. Preparations had been made and at long last he could set the wheels of his plan into motion. Mobile again, he walked into the ice, as a storm had stirred into full fury. The light of a single candle flickered in the ferocity of the arctic tempest.

Far from Baudheil, a powerful sorcerer felt the profound dread of the Black Gate, as the first lock of nine shattered. He immediately put in two weeks notice at his job.

Chapter Two:

Two Weeks Later

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The Dyrcean Mines sat half way up a very large hill, at the Southern end of the Krucian Sierra, in the Kingdom of Esthark. Roads wound about the forests and rocky bluffs that jutted out along the way up its sides. Something unnatural traversed the thick forestation, dead set on a course for Hollontown, which happened to be on the far side of the hill from the mines.

It had traveled long and far. The sun had nearly set which meant, to the creature, that the time had come for it to move again. Its gaze peered forth by the head of stag but a build otherwise atypical. The monstrosity stood composed from the corpses of several beasts merged into one massive and contorted horror. Boars, wolves, skunks, and deer all seemed mangled into a twist of conjoined flesh that dripped a black ooze from between the joints where its body was held together. The sound of three clockwork engines on a nearby road caught its attention. The monster rose up on its hind legs in a humanoid stance erected to its fullest height of fourteen feet to better examine.

The creature watched silently, hidden past the tree line along the road, as two men and a woman rode down the disused and dusty road. Close enough to follow, the shadowy figure rustled the occasional tree branch in passing. None of the three that rode down the path seemed to notice it stalking behind them. It kept off the road and maintained its distance, for the time being.

The three travelers rode their motorized velocipedes along the unkempt cobblestone road to the Dyrcean mines. The motorized velocipedes looked similar to bicycles except that

they had powered assistance which ran off a clockwork engine. They required the occasional pedaling to wind up the gear trains, sprockets, springs, and caliber within.

They stopped at the entrance to the mines. Two young men, well dressed in matching attire, disembarked their vehicles. Both wore brown frock coats over gray shirts with high turnover collars, brown pants that matched their coats, and dark brown spatterdash boots barely blemished.

One of the two gentlemen looked to be in his early twenties with a fair complexion. He stood at five foot ten inches tall with wavy brown hair trimmed to a short length cut, parted to the side and swept back. He secretly bore the mark of a death ribbon, but kept it well concealed and unmentioned.

The second gentleman appeared to be similar in age and height, but with sharper facial features. His skin looked more like roughened porcelain than flesh, his green hair swept back in a similar fashion to that of his companion's. His every movement precise, mechanical, and direct as he dismounted the velocipede and did a check of the equipment pack he wore.

The trio wore goggles at their brow and backpacks for the mission at hand. The third rider disembarked then set aside a face guard to reveal a female with blue skin, long blond hair, and pointed ears unmistakably clothed as a mechanic.

She wore the shirt and pants of a worker, sleeves rolled up to the elbow, a wide carpenter's belt lined with tools hanging about her hips. Thick leather boots adorned her feet. She unhooked a brown leather tube from her work belt, untied the safety catch and unrolled it to survey a map that looked to be in fairly good condition, though age had given it a stiff-

papered quality.

Night settled on the horizon and the two young men sparked up lanterns that had been hooked to the back of their motorized vehicles. They gathered the lights and brought them on approach to the mine.

"You're sure this is the right place?" inquired the green haired gentleman.

"I'm absolutely positive," she insisted.

"It's just, with how old that map looks, I expected the mines to look older," continued the green haired, stiff motioned, gentleman. He knelt next to the mine cart tracks, and held his lantern ahead, forced to squint in the dim light.

"We should get a move on. I have other appointments to keep," she responded. The blue skinned woman walked into the mines with the map held out before her. She gave pause to read it over then asked, "You two coming, or should I try to navigate the mine shafts blindly?"

The two men looked to one another and then proceeded to follow.

"I know that I keep saying this, Clogwid," said the young gentleman with brown hair, "but I have a doubt or two or ten."

"I know, Ben, but just think of the treasure buried down there. We'll be able to finally afford moving the shop to somewhere with higher paying customers," Clogwid replied.

The Dyrcean mines proved to be a dark and dank series of passages with pitfalls that might have claimed the party of three, were it not for the map that led them along. They travelled hours deep, through corridors that would have paralyzed a claustrophobic, before

they reached what they sought. The stone surface looked to be the same gray rock face as everywhere else throughout the convolution of mine shafts, except that painted on this wall was a big blue 'X'.

“That’s where we have to dig, Lashta?” asked Benjamin a bit suspicious at the apparent ease after hours of climbing through a rocky maze.

“X marks the spot,” she responded with a smile.

“Convenient marking,” commented Clogwid as he adjusted the straps of his backpack.

Lashta removed her backpack, set it in front of Clogwid, then said, “You two, get digging.”

Benjamin moved to her backpack and removed some pieces of machinery. Clogwid pulled a rip cord on his own pack to trigger a sizable drill that assembled itself and disentangled in segments. The machine shifted from his back to unfold over his shoulders. Benjamin assembled two hand grips from Lashta’s back pack and attached them to the drill that had latched on to Clogwid by the shoulders and waist. He then took out the components from his own backpack, which looked to be another clockwork motor that fit onto the back of the drill. With a firm press and twist Benjamin snapped the power mechanism into place.

“Ready?” asked Clogwid, as he pulled down the pair of goggles from his brow to cover his eyes.

Benjamin pulled his goggles down and looked to Lashta. She pulled her goggles down as well and then he patted Clogwid on the back.

Clogwid pulled a second rip cord, further back atop his shoulder strap, and the engine

cranked then started. He took hold of the control levers, the shot put-sized spiked tricones rotated up to speed on a two-foot long spindle, and he drilled into the blue 'X'.

The drill cut through the rock and made fast work of it, while Benjamin and Lashta stood back to avoid flying debris as it chipped away. It made a quick tunnel, just large enough for a person to fit through.

Having finished his work, Clogwid took a step back, unhooked the drill by the backpack's shoulder straps, and set it upon the ground. Benjamin passed Clogwid a handkerchief. The green haired brother wiped the rock dust from his face then said, "Thank you," as he passed it back.

"What are brothers for," replied Benjamin.

Lashta wasted no time and climbed through the hole in the wall with her satchel out. As the brothers looked into the chamber they shone another lamp inside and saw piles of jewels, copper, gold and silver coins across the floors and filling the shelves along the walls. They stared in awe for a moment, having never seen so much wealth in their entire lives.

"That's a lot of zarings," said Benjamin, taken back by the gleam of gold from the light of his lantern. The farthest wall of the money-filled room caught his attention as he saw a large circular, metallic plate with a turn wheel in the middle.

"Yeah it is," acknowledged Lashta as she pulled out a satchel, ready to fill, "You two just come all this way to look at it, or are you going to get some for yourselves?"

The sound of a blood curdling roar that shrieked out from the tunnels, from the direction of the mine entrance.

“What in the world was that?” asked Clogwid.

“I'm guessing it's nothing good,” said Benjamin as he backed up against the stone wall of the mine tunnel, “We should hurry up, get in that chamber, then dim the lanterns.”

The situation suddenly became more clear to the brothers when the turn wheel, in the middle of the metallic plate, on the opposite side of the chamber, spun about to reveal that it was, in actuality, the door to a vault.

“Lashta? What is that?” asked Benjamin as he saw light pour in from the heavy vault door on the wall opposite of the drilled hole.

“That would be the banker,” Lashta responded with a bit of a grin while she moved further into the vault, away from the brothers.

“Banker?!” exclaimed Benjamin.

The brothers stood a bit stunned yet looked to Lashta for answers.

“Yes, congratulations. You’ve abetted me in bank robbery,” Lashta smirked with a quick glance to the brothers before the banker took her attentions again.

“What’s all this then? You! How did you get in here?” shouted a short fat man at the vault door, dressed in the attire of a banker complete with, pin striped shirt, arm band and visor. Lashta ran at him, leaped, then delivered a powerful kick which landed square in his chest.

The banker hit the ground and Lashta turned to the pair, “Been fun you two, but now you’re on your own.”

Without a second look, she ran out through the bank’s vault door, past the banker, with

a satchel full of gold zarings over her shoulder.

The banker stood up and blew a whistle before shouting, "Stop! Thief!" he blew the whistle again and toddled off after her as fast as his short legs would allow. The brothers had either been unseen or temporarily forgotten from the fray.

"What do we do?" worried Clogwid a bit worried.

"I don't know..." panicked Benjamin. The brown haired gentleman looked down and picked up the map of the mines that Lashta had dropped. He held his lantern's light up to it for a better view but his thoughts were interrupted by a closer sounding roar. They heard heavy, thudding, footsteps from the same direction.

"Benjamin?" asked Clogwid.

Benjamin looked to the map again before he took Clogwid's lantern, "I've got a plan. Grab the drill and follow me."

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The neoclassical city of Hollontown bustled in the early evening. People shopped the street markets. Its buildings packed in closely, very few reached over three stories in height. Hollontown proved to be an up-to-date city, with buildings of brick, wood and copper construction, many of which shared in the more modern advancements. Water, gas and steam pipes ran between the buildings to bring comfort utilities to the citizens. Near the center of the city sat the primary guardhouse of the Hollontown Gunsmith Guard.

A telegraph, that told of a disturbance at the Hollontown Bank, came in to the guardhouse and the reserve guards suited up. Their red armor had an effective, yet primitive,

medieval appearance, complete with a helm and face shield.

In the armory each guard took one of the standard issue gun-spears; a shotgun made in the form of a staff, with the trigger and firing mechanisms half way up the neck of the six foot pole. The end had a dual-bladed bayonet with thick blades that looked like those of a halberd. Rather than a traditional magazine tube, instead it had an eight shot revolver clip. The reserve troop marched onward to the Hollontown Bank along the tightly packed cobblestone walkway of the city streets.

On main street, just at the edge of the city, outside the Hollontown Bank, one of the gunsmith guards suddenly dropped to the streets, dead on impact. His blood concealed amongst the red of his armor.

The clawed foot of a hideous, black and brown furred beast, stepped down upon the chest of the corpse in victory. It loomed as tall as the gallows, monstrous in overall size, as it walked forth in a humanoid stance. Blood dripped from the talons upon its tremendous hands.

The creature reeled back and let loose a howl to curdle the blood of all within earshot. It gazed, with haunting yellow eyes, upon the remaining guardsmen as they shook with fear. The guards pointed their gun-spears at the beast. A horrible grin spread from the mouth of its the stag-like head to show fangs the size of fingers.

The Guard Commander ordered the guardsmen to fall back, however, one failed to hear and remained before the beast. He trembled in his armor with his heart beating in his ears as he rushed the beast, jabbed at it with the spear end before the monster took a grasp of

his helmet. The guard fired off two shots before the grip of the black beast's hand tightened. The pain intensified to a degree that the guard could no longer keep hold of his gun-spear. He swung wild at the beast, with both arms, in attempt to loose the black beast's grip. Tired of the game, the beast contracted his hand contracted into a fist.

The guard's headless body hit the ground and the black beast cast its gaze upon the others in his troop. Another a smile crossed its heinous face. It held out its hand and dropped the crumpled helmet upon the ground then stomped forth towards the guards who had fallen back.

Three of the gunsmith guards ran to the beast, off its left side. With gun-spears drawn they fired shot after shot. Though the bullets penetrated its hide, it did not slow down the monstrosity in the least. A fourth guard ran at it from the front and jabbed the end of his five foot-long gun-spear into the chest of the monster. While the weapon stuck a good foot deep into the torso of the beast, from a wound that sputtered black ooze, the beast had not slowed. It swung its clawed hand at the guard and decapitated him without effort.

"Let none stand against me, for this town shall be my feast. I am Zaigreve, the black beast of the wastes and I shall devour this place till none are left," the monster declared in a deep and sickening growl. It bore its fangs as it wrapped a clawed hand around the gun-spear then withdrew the weapon lodged within its chest. It looked over the metal staff, before mangling it with a squeeze of its massive fist.

A further three of the gunsmith guard approached the beast and unloaded their weapons into it. With nothing left to fire, they rushed the beast to slash at its hide.

Zaigreve turned, and seemed amused by their efforts. A single swipe that hurled two guards through the air and they crashed down over thirty feet away. The third guard fell back. While he had dodged the slash, the armor slowed him in getting to his feet once more. With a mighty kick, the black beast of the wastes knocked the gunsmith guard through the wall of a shop behind him. The chest plate of his red armor collapsed in on itself and crushed the life from the guard's form upon impact.

A pair of guardsmen hid and cowered in an alleyway. They ducked behind an awning as the monstrosity strode by. It rampaged further into the city. They could hear crashes as it knocked over a cart and screams of death as it went after a horse. The two hidden guardsmen heard it disembowel and feast upon the animal alive.

"I don't understand. Where did this thing come from?" one guard questioned the other in a panic as he attempted to reload with shaky hands.

"I was there when it came out of the bank. We got a telegraph saying that there was a break in at the vault and when we got there that thing was bursting through the front wall of the building." replied the other guard.

"Where is the City Summoner?" came the reply.

"Vellek? He was eaten. It was rather gruesome."

"I can imagine, but then where is the City Sorcerer?"

"Sotiris? He retired this afternoon. Something about having to go on a long peregrination."

"What's a peregrination?"

"I've no clue. Some kind of sorcerer thing, probably. I don't think we can win this one. We've got to retreat," ushered the guard.

"Retreat to where?" asked the other guard. Though before an answer could be given, the pair stricken silent with fear. They scrambled to ready their weapons and fled further into the alley as the black beast stared them down with bits of equine flesh hanging from its maw.

The monster shrieked a howl at the guards and charged through the alleyway. The shots and stabs of gun-spears, that pierced its hide, did not slow it in the least as it ran into the guards and trampled them. Crushed to death by its weight as it stomped over them and continued to pick up speed. The black beast plowed into a building and continued through. It took out support beams and knocked large sections of the walls and ceiling upon the inhabitants inside. Steam pipes burst upon impact and then Zaigreve burst from the front wall of the building and onto second street. Claws dug into the pavement as the massive monster stopped in its tracks. Yet another hideous smile spread over its face as it stood with gaze fixed upon another compliment of delicious guards.

The guardsmen backed away from the creature as it stepped forwards with heavy footfalls that shook the ground. At that moment, a young-looking, tall, fiery haired, man clad in a red duster, trimmed with copper piping, stepped forwards from an alleyway, opposite the beast, to intercept the path of the creature. The City's Sorcerer, former, stood fearlessly before the beast, adjusted his tall, red, stove pipe hat, that was garnered in a black grosgrain ribbon.

"It never fails. Some young inexperienced summoner makes a talisman beyond their

ability and then something like you is suddenly walking free in the world again.” said the sorcerer, almost bored by the monstrosity on approach.

The creature gave pause before the sorcerer. It cackled to itself before it spoke, “I am the dark whispers of the blackest hearts to die in the wastes.”

“Lovely. Look, I’m hungry, tired, and very busy. I had friends in the gunsmith guard and you killed quite a few of them tonight, not to mention, Vellek,” said Sotiris as he pulled from his pocket a strip of stiff, yellow, ten inch by three inch paper. With his other hand he pulled a fountain pen from thin air. He wrote something on the strip in a strange, runic, language. His stomach grumbled and he continued, “I really haven’t eaten all day. Probably stop by the tavern after this.”

“I’m the last thing you’re ever going to see, spell caster.”

“As much as I hate to think about it, I’m going to see some things far worse than whatever it is that you are, far sooner than I’d like,” he said holding out the strip of paper before him, runic wording faced towards the black beast. “This is a talisman spell of holy fire. It takes three days to prepare and enchant the paper for a single talisman. Lucky for me, I try to keep at least one on hand at all times. If you would be so kind as to bare with me, it should just be a moment, now.”

The creature let out another blood-curdling roar, before it uttered a low growling speak, “Pathetic. You think I’m just going to lay down and die?” As Zaigreve leaned forward to lunge there followed a sudden flash of light from the palm of the sorcerer.

The talisman lit up in a golden beam that fired at the head of the beast, hitting it

between the eyes. Its head suddenly burst from its shoulders in a blaze of white and gold fire. The beast stood still with a burnt stump upon its shoulders, where its head once rested. Green smoke emanated from hole of its gaping throat. It stumbled forward and the massive frame of the black beast hit the ground with a palpable crash. Lifeless.

The sorcerer turned to the guards, "Salt the remains. Keep them in a circle of white birch ash for three days and then burn what's left. I've already sent a telegram for Edmuntle from Cross Spring. He should arrive by then and he'll help you with the rest. Now if you'll excuse me, I'm going to the tavern for that aforementioned meal."

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The silent sorcerer sat alone at his usual private table in the overcrowded Teloger Tavern. He held his stove pipe hat in hand and fiddled with the ribbon wrapped at the base. He reached into the pocket of his duster, as it hung on the back of his chair, and pulled out a pin. Sotiris lowered the black grosgrain ribbon, then tinkered with a normally hidden gear, on the side of the hat. Satisfied with his work he sighed and set the hat on the table before him.

Sotiris tried to stem his mind from the difficult task at hand, as he had already waited over an hour for his food to arrive. His stomach's rumblings served as a constant reminder that he had only had time to eat half a boysenberry tart in the morning and nothing else since. That had been many hours prior and as time crawled by in the tavern, the battle against hunger proved a task harder than his defeat of the black beast of the wastes.

He nursed the mug of beer that the bar mistress brought him shortly after he'd ordered his food. Nearly gone, he hoped that its contents could continue to sustain him until his food

arrived. His mind begged for distraction as he simply looked about at his surroundings. He stared at the steam pipes across the ceiling, as they supplied power to the mini-generator lamps that kept the bar dimly lit that night. No art on the walls, just a very basic wood-walled building. Various brass hangers drooped from the ceiling for the mirror glass relays that allowed the owners to keep an eye on the place from elsewhere unseen. Sotiris gave a sigh as he rapped his fingers on the table before him.

The sorcerer leaned back in his chair and suddenly, his inner pleas for a distraction were answered rather abruptly. He felt something new and possibly dangerous on the approach before it happened. Two young men quickly approached him from the bar and loudly sat down at his table directly across from him. The sorcerer, who had been sitting at the table first, had a rather startled expression cross his hazel eyes as he looked at the unexpected company.

"You're a wizard, aren't you?" asked Benjamin.

"Oh, please. Won't you sit down?" the sorcerer replied with an air of sarcasm.

"Sorry, but its incredibly important." replied Benjamin, "Aren't you a wizard?"

"Is it the hat that gave it away?"

"I apologize for my brother's manners," said Clogwid, "We are in a terrible need for a wizard and, at first glance, you seemed to fit the bill."

Sotiris gave a nod, "Well, you are somewhat correct in that, though a title of sorcerer would be more appropriate, and by your current state of dress I would say you are either chimney sweeps or miners."

The brown-haired brother seemed in a bit of a worried rush, "Neither, but that's unimportant presently. We really need to purchase a glamor or some sort of concealing enchantment."

The sorcerer held his hand out, then drew a finger to his lips with a shush to hush the worried young man. "I thought as such, just calm down. You'll only draw attention if you panic."

The two young men then looked about and several people stared at them. Benjamin spoke quieter, after a few of the patrons looked away, "So what do we do then?"

"Well, you look young and innocent. That and being a sorcerer, I've got a more accurate bead on your intentions than most. I really want to help you but I don't know either of you for certain," said the sorcerer as he looked at the brothers. He drew a vial of powder from his hat before he continued, "So we stay calm and have a polite conversation."

The Clox brothers looked to one another. The green-haired young man interrupted the silence, "I suppose, in polite conversation, introductions should be the first order of business."

"In most polite conversations, yes." replied the sorcerer tilting the vial to better examine its contents.

The green-haired man began first, "I'm Clogwid Clox, and this is my brother, Benjamin."

The fiery haired sorcerer gave a nod saying in turn, "Sotiris, formerly the City Sorcerer of Hollontown," then popped the cork on the vial of powder.

Benjamin swallowed hard and his worried look returned, "City Sorcerer?"

"Former. I retired... its a long story as to why."

"What sort sorcerer are you?" asked Clogwid.

"The retired sort. However, if I'm going to be of help to either of you I like to know who I'm working with and why. Why not start with what it is you two do as a profession?" said the sorcerer.

Clogwid looked to his brother and then back to the Sotiris, staring at the sorcerer's disheveled fiery red hair for a moment before he replied, "We're clocksmiths and gadgeteers. We own a shop out in Grangerion."

"Sounds impressive," noted Sotiris, "And, not to ignore your plight, but where the hell is my food?!" He threw up his arms in frustration from the ever building hunger, "Bah! They don't care."

"We ordered up at the bar. They said it shouldn't take long to have our food out." Clogwid added as he pointed, in an almost mechanical manner, to the bar in question.

"That's well and good but it really doesn't make me any less hungry," said Sotiris, distracted from the conversation with the brothers. He took a deep breath then restored his composure before he looked to Clogwid and added, "I'm sorry for this."

Before the green-haired man could respond, the sorcerer tossed half the vial of powder in his face. It puffed out and then vaporized as Clogwid shook the substance from himself, "What was that for?"

"Its event powder," said Sotiris a bit surprised as he looked to Clogwid and then the

vial before he added, "It's supposed to give me a flash of recent things that you've done; only it appears to have no effect on you."

Clogwid blinked and then resumed dusting off his jacket, "There's probably a reason for that."

Benjamin added, "You don't have to tell him-" interrupted as Sotiris hurled the remaining event powder right onto his face.

Benjamin had a more animated reaction. He flailed his arms a bit as the sorcerer read his recent actions of note like the words from a book. Sotiris saw a large commission for mining equipment. They finished on time with an extra drill to spare. A stranger came to their place of work. A female with blond hair, blue skin, pointed ears and only wearing a set of very revealing silks. She asked for their help with promises of treasure. Time read sped forward to a day's travel later. The incident with the mine and the bank played through. They hoped to drill up and out, outside the city but ended up in the stock room of a tavern. After they replaced the floorboards, they climbed in and sought a wizard but found a sorcerer. Then events came back to the present.

"You're right," Sotiris stated in a solemn tone, "You do need quite a bit of help, but you do know that you let the black beast of the wastes loose into the city, right? It did a lot of damage. It killed people I knew..."

"I don't know what that means. We heard a roar of something in the cave and we fled further in, using the map. We didn't mean to loose killer thing," Benjamin begged, "We just were just two fools looking for a treasure that didn't exist."

The sorcerer thought it over after studying the two young men, practically at the brink of tears. His stomach irked and moaned. With a sigh, he gave a response he felt he would live to regret, "Okay, fine. But I do this for you and you owe me."

"How much?" asked Clogwid with his money purse in hand.

"Not money," Replied the magic savior, "I might not look it but I've been around a while. I've got money. What I need is a favor."

"What kind of favor?" worried Benjamin.

"The kind that we don't have time to discuss right now," Sotiris nodded to the door. Two Gunsmith guards walked into the tavern with red armored chest plates, and gun-spears in hand.

The two glanced and quickly turned back to Sotiris, "Maybe they didn't see us in the mines?" pondered Clogwid.

"We'll do it. Whatever the favor, just make us hidden," Benjamin hurried.

"Then we have a contract. Something I can work off a bit faster," Sotiris said as he pulled two blank paper talismans from his coat pocket. They looked like ten inch by three inch strips of yellow paper with an ornate design carefully drawn round their edges in varied rune scripts. He pulled fountain pen from thin air and wrote something in mystic-looking runes on the talismans. The ink from his pen dried quickly and had a silvery sheen to it. He threw the talismans at the two young men sitting across from him and, very suddenly, they simply vanished.

The gunsmith guards worked their way through the crowd in the bar, asking people

about something as they pointed to a wanted poster they held up. Sotiris patiently waited for the guards to work their way to him, as they questioned people from the very full tavern. The guards finally approached and spoke the sorcerer.

"Good evening, sir Sotiris. Very sorry to interrupt your meal" one said to him.

"Good evening, sir guard. Is there something I can help you with?" he asked as though completely innocent.

"Just a few questions sir, if you don't mind," said the first Guard as the second held up a wanted poster, "Have you seen this woman? We have reason to believe she was somehow involved in the incident with the black beast." he asked, with his voice muffled by the face plate of his helmet.

Sotiris looked over the picture. From the visions gleaned off Benjamin, and the image depicted showed the likeness of Lashta. She had blue skin, blond hair, pointy ears and all. Though he noticed the name on the poster read 'Tyrnna'. He simply smiled and replied to the Guards, "I kind of wish that I had seen her."

"So is that a no?" asked the second guard.

"Yes, that is a no," he replied.

"Eating alone again, then?" asked the first guard of the sorcerer.

"That I am," he replied and immediately regretted. No sooner had the words escaped his mouth, than the food arrived for all three that were to have been at his table previously. Glad though the sorcerer was that his food had arrived, at last, he wondered how the two young men received theirs at the same time.

Chapter Three:

Open Field of View

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Elsewhere in the world, many miles to the North of the sorcerer and the Clox Brothers, lay the city of Raith in the Kingdom of Bellefeuille. On that same night, in the largest city of the Northern Kingdom, a telegraph had been sent to a specialist for a secret appointment. In other words, it started as a night like any other.

Raith stood apart in every respect from the humble streets of Hollontown. Its buildings reached to the heavens with Gothic rooftops and gargoyles that adorned their gray stone walls with arched window ways and silver inlays on every floor of the ornate and winding, spiral, structures. While they would have been a rarity in Hollontown, motorized transports frequented the onyx-paved streets of Raith.

At the border of the city limits ran a wall of brass and gray bricks that stood ten stories tall to keep back the winds and wilderness. At the epicenter of Raith, lay the Arch Ministry's Citadel; which acted as city hall, the barracks for the town guard, and the secret facilities of the Ministry of Han Kote.

The domed building stood as wide as five city blocks and fashioned primarily of white marble. The mahogany doors at the entryway stood two stories tall; each twelve feet across and two feet thick. Mechanical door openers, attached at the base of both doors, stuck out as giant brass cogs on metal rings that went into the white marble flooring of the entryway. Without mechanical aid, even the strongest of men might not be able to budge them.

Past the entryway into the Citadel walked a tall man, dressed in blue. He adjusted his

silver rimmed eyeglasses and made his way past the brown-uniformed city workers to his destination. At the end of a long corridor, an offshoot from the foyer hall just after the main entryway, the hall came to a dead end and a portrait of the city's founder.

The portrait of Sir Archibald Leach sat upon the furthest wall. More important, than the painting of the wild-haired elderly man, was the gas-lamp which hung next to it on the wall. The tall man in blue, gave the lamp a good yank and, with a racket of clanking gears, the wall and a circular section of flooring rotated. It deposited him in a secret hallway with steel lined walls instead of marble. He followed orders from the telegram he'd received earlier that hour and proceeded to his next destination, to seek an audience with the head of the Han Kote, Minister Magnus.

Magnus appeared to be in his mid-fifties, who managed to hold on to most of his hair with age. Even when at ease his face seemed riddled with wrinkles and stress lines caused by the pressure of his position. Still in his brown suit, from the business of the day; he sat by an ornate, oversized, Gothic fireplace reading over a file received by pneumatic tube. A leather scroll case, from the transit, sat on the end table next to him. He drew from his pipe as he sat, lost in thought, less relaxed as he reread the document. His eyes crossed as he read through the never-ending legal specifications. His thoughts interrupted by a knock at the door.

"Enter," beckoned Magnus.

The tall man in blue, came into the room, and hung his blue bowler hat atop the coat rack by the point of ingress. So pale in fact, with blue eyes and white hair, he appeared to suffer from albinism. He wore a blue frock coat over top a blue waistcoat, complete with side-

buttoned shirt and bow tie. A black pocket fold kept its shape by a silver pin in the form of an armored gauntlet. He stood in the door frame a moment before proceeding over to the chair across from Minister Magnus. Half-angled between facing the fireplace, and the man he'd come to meet, the tall man took a seat.

"Evening Llewellyn," began the Minister, "I see you're looking well," his voice a bit gruff after years partaking in the finer tobaccos.

"Doing well enough, sir. How might you be faring?" Llewellyn responded, a bit surprised by Minister Magnus' casual tone. He adjusted his expensive-looking, ornate, silver-rimmed glasses as he felt a bit concerned.

"Family life is a bit irksome but otherwise going well," said Magnus, "I heard you've taken up fixing airship engines, or some such thing."

Llewellyn responded in an intelligent voice, unable to sound entirely casual. He adjusted his glasses once more, nervously, "Just as a hobby, sir."

"I tried to have a hobby once," began Magnus as he looked back at the papers held in hand, "And then I had children. Well, that was the end of that notion," he chortled to himself a bit as he read over the papers.

"Not to sound rude," began Llewellyn, "But you and I have never had a casual conversation before. It's always been a bit more straight to business till now. Is everything all right?"

Magnus cleared his throat again and looked to the tall man opposite him. He adjusted his glasses and looked upon the papers in hand once more, "Quite all right, yes. Quite.

Perhaps we should get straight on to the business at hand. Priority mission just came down the pipes. Can't send in the regular police on this one. Needs to be quiet and off the records."

"Well that is what the Han Kote is for, after all," said Llewellyn. "Espionage and subterfuge are our modus operandi, as one might say."

"Indeed. Though this could prove to be quite the danger." Magnus said before he rolled up the scrolls, "This order comes straight from the Arch Minister himself."

"Who is the job and what are the whereabouts?" questioned Llewellyn.

"Not a job this time," responded Magnus, "It's an errand."

Llewellyn seemed puzzled as he asked, "Why would the Han Kote be required for an errand?"

Magnus sighed then responded, "It's the damned Vroleks from the Northern Country. One of the noblemen from Gruule decided to head south and stir up trouble in a very bad way."

"So it's a babysitting errand, then?" asked Llewellyn.

Magnus set the scroll in his lap then rubbed one of his temples in hand, "Not in the least. It's Karrn the Killer that has decided to grace us with his presence."

"Karrn the Killer sounds much more like a job than an errand." said Llewellyn, "Just to make sure I'm not missing something; you want him brought in and not taken out?"

"On the nose, my good fellow," stated Magnus, "It has to be an errand, he's a noble of Gruule and they want him back there to stand trial for his crimes, in their courts." Magnus looked to Llewellyn, eye to eye, "Non-lethal measures only. Direct writ from the Arch

Minister says that we need this as an errand because of the new treaty they've worked out with the Vroleks of Gruule. The writ specifically states that it must not be jeopardized."

Llewellyn recalled what he knew of the target, "Karrn is a monster, and not just because he's a Vrolek. He believes that if he bathes in the blood of a thousand humans he can become immortal. He's a blood magician, which in and of itself is illegal. Who knows how many he's killed already."

"Orders are orders and I cannot supersede these ones. The higher ups want him deported, not imprisoned here," said the Minister.

"That is preposterous. He won't hesitate to kill us. What if there was an accident that resulted in his demise?" suggested Llewellyn.

Magnus shook his head, "There's a reason why the Arch Minister wants the Han Kote to work on this one, and not the police. We are a superior organization and of the commanders I have, I trust you the most, my lad."

Llewellyn let out a heavy sigh and took a moment to think over what could be done, "How many followers does he have?"

"Intel suggests that he has only a handful of true followers, but that he may have as many as twenty people under blood control." said Magnus. "Those under blood control are also not to be killed. We need finesse on this one."

Llewellyn sat back in his chair to look at the ceiling as he mulled over options, "I'll need a team of five, including myself. The others I'll need are Imogene and the triplets."

"I'd rather not have Imogene pulled in on this one," insisted Magnus.

“You asked for finesse,” countered Llewellyn, “She is the best we have.”

Magnus stood with a stern look to Llewellyn, then walked over to the fireplace and pulled a lever hidden in the mantle. The fireplace spun around to reveal a steam-powered wireless telegraph that used the fire from the fireplace as its own independent power source. The minister tapped a message in while he spoke to the albino, “I’ll call in your team and have them meet you in the hangar. Take the carriage to the Whispering Way Inn. It would appear to be the base of his operations.”

Llewellyn had a bit of a smile cross his face as he stood from his seat, and prepared to set out once more. Before the albinic man could depart, Magnus added, “And If you let anything happen to my little girl, I’ll have your head.”

Llewellyn turned back as he grabbed his bowler hat from the rack. A curious look crossed his face, “Your little girl? Imogene is seven feet tall and I have personally seen her throw a full-grown man halfway across a room...”

Minister Magnus cleared his throat, “Well, I suppose she does take after her mother in that way, but nevertheless, she is still my daughter and I expect her back without a scratch.”

“All right... Any other impossible requests, while you’re at it?” asked Llewellyn.

“Just get going and remember that this is an errand and not a job.” said Magnus as Llewellyn departed the office.

* * * * *

Magnus messaged the team selected via wireless telegraph, while Llewellyn set off for the Arch Ministry’s stables. With the help of the stable hands, the albinistic man selected four

black steeds and proceeded to harness them to a stagecoach. By the time the transportation had been readied, his team members had arrived in full uniform.

The operatives dressed in blue uniforms very similar to but not exactly the same as what Llewellyn wore. Jackets with a slick look, padded pockets on the chest and at the hip level, as well curving design in the silver piping that led from the pointed shoulders down the button up front. Insignia of the Arch Ministry adorned the sides of their shoulders.

"Llewellyn," said Imogene with a smile, "Good to see you." She had to look down as she spoke to her superior seeing as she stood seven feet in height, six inches taller than her commander. Her golden complexion complimented her wavy black hair which flowed to her back at shoulder blade length. She had a strong build, but not bulky, and mostly concealed by the uniform. She adjusted her short-brimmed, blue capeline hat with her white gloved hands and looked to him as she climbed up to the driver's box. The deep brown eyes of the Amazonian woman set Llewellyn on edge as per usual.

He cleared his throat and regained composure then gave a nod to her as he questioned, "Likewise. I trust that Magnus informed you via telegraph of our situation?" Then he climbed up to sit aside her in the driver's box and took hold of the reins and looked to the triplets.

Three elven gentlemen stood before the pair with arms crossed, just to the side of the concord coach, "We were informed," commented the three in unison. Finwe, Malwe, and Setwe were commonly known as the triplets among the Han Kote operatives. Identical in every feature, from their straight blond hair at shoulder's length, to their pointy ears and a short disposition putting them at no more than four foot seven, not counting the blue, regent-

style, hats they wore. They dressed the same and talked the same, usually moving in unison or at least complimentary to one another.

“Karrn is a terror,” began Finwe. “The Northern Empires are a very savage place,” continued Malwe. “Savage beliefs and actions like his are to be anticipated.” finished Setwe, and with his words, the trio entered the coupe of the coach.

With a crack of the reins the carriage departed. The metallic wheels of the stagecoach, rang out with their rolling beats along the smooth-paved onyx streets of the city.

Headed from Main Street down town to Whispering Way and Ninth, the Han Kote operatives drove along dodging in and out of traffic; people walking, horse drawn carts, rickshaws, steam buggies and the like. It felt like no time before they had reached their destination.

The Whispering Way Inn had not a gas light lit in the whole of the building. For a private residence this would not have seemed out of place, at this time of night, but this inn never closed its doors to the weary who might arrive at any time of the evening. The five disembarked from the stagecoach and set by foot up to the building's front doorway.

“Most unusual, we should move to search quickly,” began Finwe. “Three floors in total. We should spread out to search,” added Setwe. “I'll remain on the first floor, while each of my brothers accompany you to the other floors.” finished Malwe, reaching into his pockets and assembled a silver crossbow from smaller parts.

“Funny, I thought I was in charge here, what with being the commander on this mission.” posed Llewellyn.

"I thought it was a decent plan," added Imogene.

"Well, it's not that I don't like the plan," Llewellyn said as he looked to Imogene and then the Triplets, "It's just, I personally think, that future plans should come through the chain of command."

"We're wasting time," said Finwe, "We should go now," said Malwe, "We need to move," said Setwe.

Llewellyn nodded at the trio, as they talked together then, gave the door a try. Locked, he looked to the windows but all on the first floor were barred with thick cast iron. He looked to Imogene, "Lights are all out, I think they are in a bit of trouble within. Do you think you could open the door for us?"

She nodded and drew her twin gun-hammers from their holsters. The weapons resembled a colt dragoon pistol but with the end of the grip reinforced, modified into heavy metal handled shillelaghs. Her custom machined pistols had been scaled up to her size and took fourteen gauge shotgun shells instead of bullets. Imogene used the barrels as the handle-grips for the hammers, then knocking off the door handle and bolt lock in two quick strikes. With a mighty kick she knocked the door in.

"Thank you Imogene. Now that the element of surprise is not so much an option, per the triplets' suggestion, we should hurry," said Llewellyn as he drew his own, somewhat smaller, gun hammers and entered the lobby. He stood next to Finwe as he looked to the elven weapon and gave the reminder, "Remember, this is just an errand."

"We've got knock out bolts," began Finwe, "feathered end to slow travel," added

Malwe, "Non-lethal, unlike the two who have guns," finished Setwe.

"Salt rounds," said Imogene as she displayed her gun hammers, "Hurt like hell though," she added as she entered the building and headed up to second floor alongside Finwe.

"Salt rounds?" asked Llewellyn, "Here I brought rubber bullets like a fool."

* * * * *

The building's interior had the appearance of a quaint gingham design in sharp contrast to the Gothic exterior that all the city's buildings shared. Clutter lay about the lobby as though people had simply departed in the middle of their day to day activities. Not one person seemed left in the inn as Finwe and Llewellyn made their way through the wide hallway, checked room after room. First the main dining hall, then split up and quickly covered the first floor.

"This is strange... Should be the base of operations but there is not a person in sight," commented Llewellyn, "Have the others found anything yet?"

"Checking," began Finwe. He seemed to concentrate a moment, then paused mid-step, before he resumed, "Malwe has seen not a soul, and it would seem that Imogene and Setwe are in the same boat. We will keep our eyes open though."

"I don't feel right about this in the least," said Llewellyn checking another empty room. Only two doors remained unchecked.

"We know how you feel," said Finwe, "Malwe is headed down to the cellar now. But we think that there may have been a mislead here."

"Have him wait. Intel said this was the place. We should all head down there as a group." ordered Llewellyn, "Safety in numbers and all that."

With one final room to check, Finwe stopped. He remained motionless and quiet. Llewellyn checked the room but found it as empty as the rest, "Malwe?" asked the elven triplet to no one.

"What is it, Finwe?" asked Llewellyn

"Something's not right," came the answer.

Llewellyn gave a nod to the elf, "I was just saying that."

"No. You don't understand... I can't sense Malwe. I think he is unconscious." stated Finwe with a very concerned stare. He looked back and forth as though he searched for some unseen thing, troubled that he was unable to connect with his brother, "The link is cut off. He must not be conscious."

"Is there a limit to the range or anything that could be causing interference?"

"Not that I've found. If he were awake we would be able to sense it," said Finwe, as he looked to the taller man with a greater sense of urgency. The floor they resided on seemed deserted and from Finwe's description, Imogene and Setwe hadn't any better luck.

"Have Setwe tell Imogene that we are all going to meet by the entrance to the cellar," directed Llewellyn, headed for the stairs with the elven man in tow, "We're going to find your brother, Finwe."

* * * * *

In the dark of the gaslit hotel, the four that remained gathered in the front lobby. They

sparked up a few more gas lamps to illuminate their surroundings as the building appeared abandoned. "This is not the last place he was," began Finwe. The two remaining triplets locked eyes for a moment before Setwe continued, "We have to go through the kitchen. That is where it went black."

"Lead the way," commanded Llewellyn as he let Finwe and Setwe lead on. The two triplets moved in unison and their synchronicity seemed to have intensified to aid in the search of their brother. They led Imogene and Llewellyn through the foyer, the dining hall, and then to the back of the kitchen.

In the back two steel doors lay flush with the floor, which led to the wine cellar. Finwe and Setwe spoke in unison, "He went down there," as they tried the door handles. Neither door would budge.

"It's locked..." began Setwe.

"From the other side," continued Finwe

"Right. Step aside," said Imogene, as she readied her gun-hammer revolvers. She pounded at the doors with the reinforced hammer-end of her guns. Neither a dent nor scratch sullied the thick cast iron. She stopped before she broke her sidearms, then gave the doors a few kicks and tried to pull the handles herself. She looked to the two remaining triplets a bit distraught then gave a shake of her head, "Solid cast iron. I'd break my guns or bones before budging these doors, and that still wouldn't open them."

Finwe turned to Llewellyn, "You know what you have to do."

"We're running out of time," Setwe chimed in.

Llewellyn approached the heavy doors and put a hand on them. He stood upright as he said "I've only worked with wood before. Never anything metal."

"We could try unhinging the doors, or maybe break up the floor in another spot," suggested Imogene.

"Unlikely," began Finwe, "If it is as we remember from Malwe's entrance, the door is welded to the rebar in the concrete floors of this level."

"It was the last thing he saw..." finished Setwe.

With a sigh, the tall, pale, man removed his glasses and closed his eyes. He concentrated and gave a quick warning before he began, "Remember. Whatever you do, do not look into my eyes. Bad things have happened when I've done this before. It's best just to look away till it's over."

The three with him averted their gaze. A moment later, Llewellyn opened his eyes and they glowed blue. The twin cerulean lights projected forth and met with a symbol in the center, which looked like a crescent moon within two overlapping octagons. One spun clockwise and the other counter-clockwise. They cast luminescence upon the wall across from Llewellyn until he looked at the cellar doors, redirected the runes and spoke only one word, "Open."

The lights in his eyes went out and metal of the door rolled back on itself. The cast-iron door seemed to obey the command until a circular opening, wide enough for a man to walk through, made way. The shrieking of metal deformation ceased and Imogene acted quickly to catch her superior officer as he collapsed.

Llewellyn seemed short of breath as he took the handkerchief from his jacket pocket, then attempted to stop a nosebleed set on from the ordeal, "I'll be fine. We should hurry."

Imogene set the eyeglasses back on the bridge of his nose while Setwe and Finwe retrieved lanterns from one of the kitchen shelves then handed them to her as Llewellyn recovered enough to stand under his own power. The four proceeded down into the dark of the cellar.

As they made their way down, they found the cellar to be as empty as the hotel it lurked under, but they did notice that on the far wall there appeared to be a tunnel out from the dank, dark room. They saw lights and heard footsteps from the point of egress.

That's when they came. People wearing hooded, black cloaks poured in through the tunnel like howling madmen as they ran upon the small group. The four dropped their lanterns and drew weapons as the hooded madmen swarmed into the cellar and immediately lashed out.

The cloaked attackers had no weapons but they grabbed and flailed almost mindlessly. They lashed out with their limbs to strike wild and blind. A dozen of them in the first wave.

The cloaked men came upon Imogene first, as she took point in front of the other three. She dropped the first two in immediately as her revolvers unloaded salt rounds square in their chests and knocked them back to a third that followed close behind.

They ran through so rapidly that a further four met with Finwe and Setwe, while Imogene flipped her guns hammer-side to fight the up-close intruders. The elven brothers unloaded knock out bolts, rapid fire, from their wrist-mounted cross bows. They dropped a

dozen of them with Imogene as she alternated between using the hammer hilt of her revolvers and shooting salt rounds. She switched quickly between the two, as needed while Llewellyn picked them off down the corridor.

As he looked over the rim of his glasses he saw further down the tunnels as a second wave approached. The albinic man shot into the dark and never missed a target as the other three handled the cloaked attackers that made it into the room. Rubber bullets knocked the impacted targets unconscious with pinpoint accuracy in every strike. The hall and room fell silent as the oncoming attackers dropped to the floor, rendered unconscious or otherwise immobilized.

Llewellyn broke the silence, "I really hate blood drones. They move so... unsettling." He looked over the rim of his glasses, checked down the tunneled corridor, and saw nothing on approach.

Imogene smelled something pungent from the point of egress, "Something smells very pungent down that tunnel. I think it wafted in with the crowd..." she coughed and covered her nose to breath against her gloved hand.

Finwe and Setwe did not seem to have much input and sped down the tunnel quick as they could run. "There is a reason for the stench," began Finwe, as he exited to the other side of the tunnel.

"This tunnel exits into the sewage system," continued Setwe.

They looked up and down the sewer tunnel both ways, noted that there were torches along the walls, and other tunnels which must have emptied into other buildings on the

surface. A walkway ran along either side of the sewer pipe and a stream of refuse and sewage ran between the walkways like a river of street sludge. The elves looked about and continued to lead Llewellyn and Imogene.

“This is not the only base of operations. There are quite a few tunnels, exiting the sewers here...” started Finwe.

“What was the source of our intel on this particular mission?” asked Setwe.

Llewellyn and Imogene followed the remaining triplets through the sewers of Raith. It appeared as though every building along Whispering Way had tunnels from the sewers connected to their cellars. Imogene noticed a broken hand held drill discarded on the ground near the sewer entrance to the Whispering Way Inn. She held it up for Llewellyn, who adjusted his glasses and read aloud, “Clox Brothers Clockworks Shop. I do believe we’ll have to look into that later.”

While Llewellyn and Imogene looked at the backpack drill, the two remaining triplets closed their eyes in focus before they pointed and spoke in unison, “He’s this way.”

They heard the sound of footfalls and the howling madness of the blood drones once more. They performed the bidding of their master and rushed upon the party of four.

The group readied their weapons, reloaded, and rushed onward to meet the crowd head on. Suddenly Finwe and Setwe stopped cold. Imogene noticed and pulled Setwe by the hand, only to find that he could not be moved.

The swarm of blood drones set upon the group. As Llewellyn and Imogene took defensive stances, ready to protect their elven comrades, the blood drones simply halted.

They lined the walkways to either side of the sewer pipe.

The legion of blood drones gathered in a greater number of the blood-magic-controlled than had ever been witnessed by any of the Han Kote operatives. Llewellyn and Imogene looked to one another, unsure what to do. Finwe and Setwe stood motionless. Then the legion spoke as one. The voice seemed to rise from the middle of the crowd and spread outward, "The Raith Ministries... How amusing that they should think my operation was so small that only a handful would be needed to ensnare me."

"I assume that this is Karrn speaking," said Llewellyn, "What have you done with Malwe?"

"Ah, the elf. One of three. Linked by family. Linked mentally. I suspected they may even share the same life force. What an interesting outcome, wouldn't you say?" spoke the legion.

Imogene tightened the grip on her large gun-hammer revolvers, "Release them now!"

Karrn's blood-controlled legion spoke again, "You are in no position to demand anything of me. With their species not suiting my needs, I do feel most inclined to release them. However, I fear you will find it is not in the manner that you may have wished."

Setwe and Finwe lifted from the ground and were flung to opposite walls of the sewer pipes. They flailed and grasped at their necks as they choked on an invisible force. Llewellyn and Imogene did their best to try and pull them down as the legion spoke once more. "It is too bad they are of elven blood. It is of no use to me."

A sickening kashl squelched out of the pair combined with the cracking of bones as the

necks of the elves turned in a way they were never meant to. The bodies dropped to the ground, lifeless, with the heads of the dead elves facing backwards.

Imogene dropped to her knees before the body of Setwe. She only lifted the lifeless form from the ground for a short moment before it sank in that he had truly gone. She gently returned his body to the cobblestone walkway where it initially fell departed. She moved a hand across his face to close the eyes that fixed with a look of horror in his final glance.

Llewellyn bounded across the seven foot wide drainage stream to the opposite walkway then placed a hand on the shoulder of his fallen friend and ministry partner. He closed his eyes then did the favor to his departed Elvin friend. Thereafter he turned his pained glare across the way to have it met with Imogene's own. They shared a determined gaze as the tall, pale, man then pressed his glasses back against the bridge of his nose. He stood in unison with her, facing the legion of Karrn.

"How... touching," spoke the legion, before the previously unconscious lot from the cellar of the inn marched forth to block the exit. "Big things are coming, little ones."

"Crowd dispersal pattern sigma?" suggested Llewellyn.

"An awful lot of them for just the two of us. And they seem to make faster recoveries under the blood control," responded Imogene.

"Too true, but there's hardly another option at the moment," stated Llewellyn.

"You are the commanding operative, sir," said Imogene as she and Llewellyn readied the shillelagh sides of their gun-hammer revolvers. They charged forward into the crowds on either walkway. They aimed for the legs and pushed them off into the stream of street sewage

that separated the two walkways.

It took the legion a moment to begin their retaliation through the mental commands of Karn, which gave the remaining Han Kote Operatives a small head start on their push back.

The pair fought well but the number of blood drones overwhelmed all too soon. Llewellyn had time to reload one of his revolvers before the legion toppled completely over him as a wave of screaming humans. He hit one after another and either knocked them down and out or pushed them into the river of filth. They kept at it but they pressed forth faster than he could knock them aside. Llewellyn struggled with the non-lethal combat while Imogene seemed to excel.

Imogene did not bother to reload as she knocked them into the stream and pushed them off into one another. Soon the crowd built up and they rushed her as a singular powerful force. She focused on the fight and did not see when her commanding operative fell to the blood drones.

Llewellyn succumbed to the overwhelming numbers that swarmed over him. Dozens of people climbed atop him and struck wild blows that, in such overwhelming odds, they rendered him unconscious. The last thing he saw, before he slipped out of consciousness was just how fiercely Imogene could fight.

She made it a bit further through the human swarms as she charged through and knocked down several people. Imogene picked up two at a time and tossed them into the encroaching crowd to knock down more of the blood drones. She tried with all her fury to fight but hundreds pushed on her by a single will. The strong woman fell from her footing,

the flood of humans engulfed her, and she fell into to an unconscious state from the ever persistent blows.

* * * * *

“Llewellyn!”

How long have I been out for? Thought Llewellyn as he came to in an odd kind of ceremonial chamber. The stench of the sewer still rang out so they must not have gone into any of the buildings surface-side.

“Llewellyn!”

He observed the black-cloaked blood drones held him by the arms and kept him standing up right. Four revolvers lay at his feet. Red tapestries hung on the wall and an elevated platform had been erected in the middle of the room.

“Llewellyn!” Imogene cried out again, and had drawn his attention at last. Her arms were bound behind her with thick cast-iron chains that wrapped her entire torso. She hung atop the platform in the center of the room and slowly spun counter-clockwise as the chains that bound her were hooked to the ceiling. He returned from the daze of his unwilling unconscious state to see that Karrn stood next to her.

Karrn looked like a Neanderthal, as did all of the Vroleks, except that his skin flushed as a deep red, his caliginous hair rang of pitch black, and his proportions must have put him around four hundred pounds. He looked more like a gorilla than a man, except that he stood upright and wore a well-kept black box-coat and full suit to accompany it.

“So he returns to the living at last,” Karrn grunted through his own voice, which

sounded like the deep growl of large dog. The Vrolek gave Imogene a bit of a push to spin her more upon her chains.

“Imogene!” exclaimed Llewellyn, fully back to his senses, “What have you done to her?”

“This most excellent female human specimen? Why I've done nothing to her except prepare her for the very same treatment you will soon receive. I would say that my Lorner Skel, or blood drones as you may call them, are nearing a count of three hundred.” said Karn. “I thought it would be most entertaining to have you watch before seeing what was to transpire for you as well... Llewellyn? Was it?” a sickening grin of gnarled teeth spread across the face of the monster.

“I can't move Llewellyn. Can't get loose.” said the slowly spinning Imogene.

“This is your only warning to let her go, Karn.” informed Llewellyn

“Warn away. What are you going to do? Spit in my general direction?” grinned Karn as he watched the albinic man struggle.

Without a word Llewellyn pulled his right arm free, kicked his revolver from the ground before him, to his hand and unloaded on their Vrolek captor. The six shots emptied so fast it sounded like a single, loud, blast. The blood drones redoubled their efforts and restrained the tall, pale man once more. In the struggle to prevent his being held, the silver-rimmed glasses fell from his brow and hit the ground with a crack.

Karn stood with six fresh holes in his suit but his grin did not waver in the least. He looked down at his suit, punctured by the bullets fired. He brushed downwards, along

himself, and the bullets fell out from under his box coat then rattled on the ground. The Vrolek looked to Llewellyn, "Live rounds? And here I thought you were carrying rubber bullets to subdue?"

"I changed out on the last reload," said the tall pale man, "Thought you might befitting more than rubber bullets."

"I must say that you have indeed begun to awaken an anger within me that I feel must not go unquelled. Yes. The female shall no longer be converted." Then Karrn placed a large, monstrous hand over top her head, "Instead, she shall be the first blood added to my bath."

"Get your hand off of me!" Imogene punctuated with a kick that would have doubled over a normal man. It did not seem to affect the monster as he kept his grip over her head.

"Now now dear, if bullet's have little more than a tickle to me, what hope do your thrashings have?" Karrn asked gripping one of her legs. Though the kicks did stop when she saw a familiar, blue, glow light up the side of the monster's face. She became still and clenched her eyes shut tightly.

"What's all this th..." began Karrn as he looked towards the tall man, though unable to continue as he looked to the bright blue light that shone forth onto his face. The blood drones released their grips on Llewellyn but he did not move from where he stood.

As the Vrolek's gaze met with that of the tall pale man's, his eyes sublimated from within his head. His grip released and both of his hands came to the side of his head. His mouth opened wide, unable to formulate anything but an unearthly scream as he could not break the stare even as his eyes went from a solid to gaseous state inside his skull.

The blood drones seemed to all repeat his action, then fell to their knees and screamed as one with their master. Their eyes did not subliminate but the pain transferred, till the grip he held on them released, and they fell like a stack of dominoes, onto each other, unconscious.

Llewellyn spoke but one word, "Open."